

Ignatius of Antioch: Assembly as Witness Against the Powers John Mark Hicks

*Therefore, make every effort to come together more frequently to give thanks and glory to God. For when you meet together frequently, the powers of Satan are overthrown, and his destructiveness is nullified by the unanimity of your faith. There is nothing better than peace, by which all warfare among those in heaven and those on earth is abolished.*¹

Our Context: 16% of the US attends a weekly religious service; 30% attend once a month.²

Ignatius's Biography: While bishop of Antioch, Ignatius was arrested and escorted to Rome by ten Roman soldiers. As he traveled across modern Western Turkey (Asia Minor), he met Polycarp in Smyrna and received visitors. There he wrote letters to the Ephesians, Magnesians, Trallians, and Romans. He then stayed over in Troas from where he wrote letters to Philadelphia and Smyrna as well as to Polycarp, bishop of the church in Smyrna. He was executed in Rome around 112-115 A.D.

Ignatius's Context: Ignatius lived in a hostile culture filled with violence, injustice, and immorality. Imperial power promoted and protected both Rome's gods and its imperial cult. Also, though mob violence was not common, neither was it rare. Gladiatorial games entertained the people; pornography and brothels filled the cities and the public squares; economic and social realities pressured people to conform to imperial powers, their rituals, and public processions; Christians were identified as an unwelcome sect that subverted Roman culture; and Christians faced heretical challenges from within.

Digging into the Text:

"Therefore"—believers "are the highway of those who are being killed for God's sake" (Eph 12:2).

"make every effort to come together more frequently"—this is Paul's language in Ephesians (4:3) and 1 Corinthians (11:17, 20, 33; 14:23). Literally, the language is "in one place" (ἐπι τὸ αὐτὸ [*epi to auto*]) in the phrase when "you meet together frequently." That is the phrase used in Acts 2:44, 47 and 1 Corinthians 11:20; 14:2. It is a gathering in one place, an assembly. It is literally "when you become in one place." Or, in Ephesians 5:3, Ignatius writes: "Therefore whoever does not meet with the congregation" (literally, "do not come together in one place"). It is idiomatic for assembly.

"to give thanks and glory to God"—these are stated purposes of the assembly (εἰς εὐχαριστίαν θεοῦ καὶ εἰς δόξαν). The church gathers to glorify God and give thanks, which means to partake of the Eucharist (translated "Eucharist" in Philadel 4:1 and Smyr 8:1). "Breaking one bread" is the "medicine of immortality, the antidote we take in order not to die but to live forever in Jesus Christ" (Eph 20:2). For example, Ignatius counsels to avoid those who deny Jesus because the Eucharist, according "to the prophets and especially to the gospel, in which the passion has been made clear to us and the resurrection has been accomplished" (Smyr 7:2).

"come together more frequently . . . because (ὡὰρ)" in the assembly "the powers of Satan are overthrown and his destructiveness is nullified"—Ignatius refers to these powers (δυνάμεις, *dunameis*; like Paul in Eph 1:21) as the "ancient kingdom" which was abolished and

¹ Michael W. Holmes, editor and reviser, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 145, quoting Ignatius of Antioch, Ephesians 13.

² The first is the result of the Public Religion Research Institute (<https://www.prrri.org/press-release/survey-church-attendance-importance-of-religion-declines-among-americans-overall-yet-regular-churchgoers-largely-satisfied-with-church-experiences>), and the second number is from the Pew Research Group (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/03/28/how-the-pandemic-has-affected-attendance-at-u-s-religious-services/>). Incidentally, only about 15% of colonists were churched in the Revolutionary War era; cf. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (Rutgers University Press, 2005), 22, and "American Religion in 1776: A Statistical Portrait," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, no. 1 (March 1989) 51.

“all magic and every kind of spell” of wickedness were loosed (or nullified) when “God appeared in human form to bring the newness of eternal life” (Eph 19:3). The “abolition” of the “ancient kingdom” is equated with the “abolition of death.”

“by the unanimity of your faith”—the harmony (ὁμονοία, *homonía*) of believers gathered in assembly is the weapon waged against the “ancient kingdom,” “powers,” or “ruler of this age” (Eph 17:1; 19:1; cf. Paul in Eph 3:10; 6:12). For Ignatius, faith harmonizes us, and this is “faith in and love of Jesus Christ our Savior” (Eph 1:1) and “faith in [Jesus] and love for him, his suffering and resurrection” (Eph 20:1). Indeed, all believers “gather together in grace, by name, in one faith and one Jesus Christ who physically was a descendant of David, who is Son of Man and Son of God” (Eph 20:2). Moreover, faith is the “beginning” of life and “love is the end, and the two, when they exist in unity (ἐνότητι) are God” (Ephesians 14:1). The gathered community neither sins nor hates but is recognized “by its fruit; thus, those who profess to be Christ will be recognized by their actions.” The “power of faith” enables the church to persevere “to the end” (Eph 14:2), and this “faith in God” protects them from false (evil) teaching (Eph 16:2).

“peace, by which all warfare among those in heaven and those on earth is abolished”—there is a cosmic war in play, and this war (πόλεμος, *polemos*) is named in Revelation 12:7, 17; 13:7 where dragon and the beast make war on the saints. Ignatius uses the language of “armor” (πανοπλία, *panoplia*) in Polycarp 6:2 that parallels Paul’s usage in Ephesians 6:11, 13 (cf. Rom 13:12). For Ignatius, baptism is the shield, faith is the helmet, love is the spear, and endurance is the armor. Assembling wages war through peace whereby cosmic conflict is abolished or nullified.

Theology of Assembly in Ignatius: United and Empowered Against Cosmic Enemies

1. We gather in peace and harmony as a community to share the Eucharist and glorify God.
2. Through the harmony of our faith in the work of God as a gathered people we participate in the subversion of the powers of Satan and render powerless his destructiveness.
3. To practice peace and testify to peace in order to nullify the war against the saints.
4. The center of this gathering is the Eucharist which testifies to the death and resurrection of Jesus, by which we share in immortal life in the present and in the resurrection to come, testifying against the gates of Hades.

Hebrews: Assembly as divine encounter, public witness, and mutual encouragement.

1. A gathered community that was living in a wilderness (ch. 3), called to persevere in faith (chs. 10-11), and expecting persecution and martyrdom (ch. 12).
2. “Let us draw near to God” in *faith* to participate in heavenly assembly (10:22; 12:22-24).
3. “Let us hold fast to the confession of our *hope*” as a witness against the powers (10:23).
4. “Let us consider how to provoke one another to *love* and good deeds” (10:24).

It is here within these sacred precincts that we should realize that divine spiritual unity which can be preserved only by the bond of peace. Partakers of one bread, we are one body. Animated by one Spirit, cheered by one hope, led by one Lord, sustained by one God and Father of all, it is here we should ever feel the eternal ties which bind us to each other. It is here amidst the light of life and the joys of salvation that we may renew our vows of fealty. It is here we may put on the armor of light, and prepare to contend together "against principalities; against powers; against the rulers of the darkness of this world; against spiritual wickedness in high places." It is, from the heights of Zion we must go forth, marshaled beneath the banners of our heavenly King, in compact array, aggressive, invincible and victorious, to scatter the legions of darkness and fill the earth with the glory of the Lord.³

Robert Richardson (1872)

³ Robert Richardson, *Communings in the Sanctuary* (Lexington, KY: Transylvania Printing & Publishing Co., 1872), 132-3.